

NOTES & QUERIES

HENRY WISE (1653–1738), ‘SON OF A COMMON GARDENER AT DEPTFORD’

Henry Wise (1653–1738) was the Royal Gardener from 1702, and deputy Ranger and Keeper of the Island and Pond in St James’s Park from 1704, resigning both positions in 1728. In 1956, David Green wrote the first biography of this gardener from the era of formal gardens, yet despite his best efforts he was unable to track down Wise’s origins. The new findings presented here provide additional light on Wise’s early life.

Henry Wise petitioned for and obtained a grant of arms in 1719, and his descendants lived as gentry in Warwickshire. They expended a considerable effort at various times to unearth Henry’s origins. All that was known was the birth year, as this was to be found in the College of Arms, in the margin of notes made in 1840 in preparation for a pedigree. This ran: ‘Henry Wise born 2 Aug. 1653, bapt. 4 of the same mo.,’ but no place or parentage was given.

In the petition Henry stated that his grandfather had been

Richard Wise [...] who descended out of Oxfordshire had in the Reign of King Charles the first an Estate of 700 £ per Annum or thereabouts [...] he lived to the Age of 112 years and died in or about the year 1698.¹

However, Richard proved elusive. Wises occur in at least eighteen parishes in Oxfordshire, but no obvious candidate emerged. Confusion was thrown in when Burke’s *Landed Gentry* gave Richard’s residence as ‘Caddleston, co. Warwick’.² No such place exists.

A more helpful lead was communicated to the present author by the historical geographer Dr Peter Brandon (1927–2011), well known for his books on the South Downs, The Weald and the North Downs. Having looked into Leith Hill, the highest point in the Surrey Hills, and partly on the Wotton Estate, he contributed to *A Celebration of John Evelyn*.³ The extensive plantations on the high ground were the achievement of the diarist’s grandson, Sir John Evelyn (1682–1763), 1st Bt. During his research Brandon had dipped into Sir John’s journal and had come across a mention of Wise’s origins. A visit to the British Library confirmed this to have

been the case and that Sir John was a keen garden visitor (see the Appendix). On 2 May 1721, Sir John had visited Brompton Park:

I went to see Mr Wise the Kings Gardner, & thank him for some fine flower roots lately sent me by him. he was not at home, but I saw his flower garden stockt with beautifull Auriculas the much spoil’d by y^c wett season. This person is son of a Common Gardner at Deptford who was Tenant to my Grandfather & served S^r Ed: Seymour as his Gardner but by his Industry & improvements in Gardening has raised a considerable estate.⁴

When researching George London’s origins, George Royle spotted in the *International Genealogical Index* that a Henry Wise was baptized on the right date in the parish of St Alfege, Greenwich.⁵ His father was another Henry Wise. Deptford and Greenwich are less than a mile apart, with Deptford being on the Surrey (west) bank of the Ravensbourne, and Greenwich being on the Kent (east) bank. A search of the parish records of these places shows that Henry the Elder started a family in Greenwich by 1650, though by 1654 he was in Deptford. Henry the Younger’s siblings were an elder sister (b. 1650), Richard (b. 1656), Ralph (b. 1661) and Elizabeth (b. 1666). At the same time there was a Dorrell Wise (d. 1663) and his family in Deptford, and later a Richard Wise and his wife Jane were recorded as both being buried in 1689.⁶

The question arises as to whether this Richard was the patriarch from Oxfordshire. For this we must turn to the Wise family in Banbury in that county and its offshoot in Bodicote, a small place a couple of miles south. There were many Wises in Banbury, a notable case being John, a clockmaker. He was apprenticed in London, based himself in Warwick in the 1650s specializing in church clocks and then, in 1669, moved back to London, where he and his sons and cousins made long-case clocks which are highly prized today.

Bodicote’s parish registers show two families of Wises in the early seventeenth century. Richard ‘the elder’ had six boys and a girl by his wife Jhoane, or Jone. Among them was Henry (b. 1614/15). Meanwhile Richard ‘the younger’ had three boys by his wife Alice, the eldest being Dorrell (b. 1613), no doubt named to honour

some connection with the Dorrells of Banbury. This suggests that Dorrell and Henry the Elder in Deptford were related somehow, grew up together in Bodicote and together travelled from Oxfordshire to Greenwich. This was probably after 1643, for Henry appears to have had a first wife Katherine who was buried in Bodicote that year.

The probability of the Richard and Jane (which had become the usual rendering of Johanne or Jone) of Deptford being Henry the Elder's parents seems high. Since Henry was born in 1614/15, Richard must have been born c.1590, and a good candidate was a Richard Wise baptized in Banbury in 1592. He was not likely to have lived for 112 years, as Henry the Younger claimed in 1719, but if he died in 1689, he would have been ninety-seven – a remarkable age, nevertheless.

Curiously, there is no mention yet found of the name of Henry Wise the Elder's second wife, nor of when he died, from parish registers. However, there was a Henry Wise of Bodicote, gentleman, who made his will in 1687, leaving his property to his widow Prudence. Probate was granted 26 May 1693.⁷ It is very possible that Henry the Elder had returned to Bodicote. A Prudence Wise was buried in the chancel at Bodicote in 1726/27, possibly a daughter.

We can now fairly confidently locate Henry Wise's father, Henry, and grandfather, Richard. The tale that Richard was wealthy but then ruined for his support of Charles I was one often heard by the College of Arms and would have been an embellishment on hardship no doubt suffered as a consequence on being on the wrong side of the Parliamentarians. Green recounted that 'The archivist employed by the Wise family in the 1920s searched thirteen manuscript volumes of Sequestration Papers and five printed volumes of calendars of papers of the Committee for Compounding (Commonwealth), State Papers Domestic (1640–60)', with no result. Richard was of the yeoman class, not a lord of the manor.

Nothing is known of Wise's decision to follow his father into gardening, his apprenticeship or his freedom, but if he were born in 1653, he would have been freed c.1676.

Returning now to Evelyn's journal, it provides another clue to Wise's early years in mentioning that he was gardener to Sir Edward Seymour. This gentleman was well known as Speaker of the House of Commons (1673–78) and his many subsequent appointments, and as a relative of the Duke of Somerset. It was debated which was the haughtier. Sir Edward was building a new house at Maiden Bradley, Wiltshire, in the late 1680s, while selling the materials from the Elizabethan ancestral home at Berry Pomeroy, Devon, thus reducing it to a ruin.

The first known mention of Wise as a gardener was by George London in a letter to Viscount Weymouth, dated 11 June 1687: 'My Partner, Mr. Wise, being this day sett out for bradley i have desir'd him to wait upon y^e H^e in order to give me in a line or two an Account

of y^e H^e further comands.'⁸ Weymouth's seat at Longleat was just a few miles over the downs from Maiden Bradley. For London to have admitted Wise as a partner in the Brompton Park nursery, he must have impressed at Bradley House and most probably elsewhere. Perhaps some future researcher will be able to plug some of this gap as well.

APPENDIX: SOME REMARKS ON GARDENS
VISITED BY SIR JOHN EVELYN, 1ST BT,
1719–22

Sir John Evelyn was a habitual visitor of other people's gardens, in this period often with his brother-in-law, Lord Harcourt. April 1719 saw him at Fetcham Park, Surrey, where he was impressed by the gardens laid out by George London.⁹ In August 1722, he went to Cliveden, Buckinghamshire, where he enthused about the view and noted that Lord Orkney's 'Parterre behind the house was now laying out & will be very spacious'.¹⁰ Later that month he noted that 'y^e Walks in y^e Park' at Langley Park 'are long, & nicely Kept'.

Evelyn was often at his own estate of Sayes Court, in Deptford, Surrey. On 10 May 1721, he made an affectionate reacquaintance with his grandfather's garden, then on lease:

I went to Deptford upon business & in the evening to Sayes Court to visit Mr Henley Member of Parliament for Lyme Regis in Dorsetshire y^e new Tenant in y^e roome of Mr Darby deceased, who was not at home, but I walk't in the garden much improved by his continuing y^e great middle grass walk thro the old bowling green now turn'd into an Orchard & by planting a row of trees in little Crane mead to lengthen y^e view. I was al the while serenaded by the Nightingales which at this season y^e Groves are never without. I went also up into the Summer house erected at one corner of y^e garden by Mr Darby, which being pretty high from y^e ground affords a very fine prospect of London, y^e river with the Ships, black heath, & twenty miles into Essex over y^e Isle of dogs.¹¹

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¹ David Green, *Gardener to Queen Anne: Henry Wise (1653–1738) and the Formal Garden* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 207–8.

² John Burke and John Bernard Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic Dictionary of the Landed Gentry of Great Britain & Ireland*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1847), 2: p. 1618.

³ Peter Brandon, "Invest in Gardening, Groves and Walkes": how Evelyn's grandson carried out his instructions to revive the Wotton landscape', in Mavis Batey (ed.), *A Celebration of John Evelyn* (Godalming: Surrey Gardens Trust, 2007), pp. 121–39.

⁴ Diary of Sir John Evelyn, 2 May 1721; British Library (BL), London, Add. MS 78514B, f. 26^v.

⁵ George Royle, 'Family links between George London and John Rose: new light on the pineapple paintings', *Garden History*, 23/2 (1995), pp. 246–9, n. 2.

⁶ Details gleaned via Ancestry.co.uk. The Deptford St Nicholas register later revealed the family of one of Wise's nieces who, although unnamed, appears in his will. She had married into the Hyatt family, shipwrights, presumably in the Royal Docks at Deptford.

⁷ Will of Henry Wise of Bodicote, gentleman, 1687; The National Archives (TNA), PROB 11/414, f. 420; strangely, there was also a Henry Wise of Bodicote, yeoman, whose will was given probate on 3 July 1691, though it is unlikely he was the father of the Royal Gardener, as his eldest son was a Cadwallader who appears in the Warwick registers; TNA, PROB 11/405, f. 208.

⁸ Green, *Gardener to Queen Anne*, pp. 10, 11.

⁹ Diary of Sir John Evelyn, April 1719; BL, Add. MS 78514B, f. 6^v; see also Vivien White, 'George London at Fetcham Park, Surrey', *Garden History*, 45/2 (2017), pp. 143–54.

¹⁰ Diary of Sir John Evelyn, August 1722; BL, Add. MS 78514B, f. 14^r.

¹¹ Ibid., 17 May 1721; BL, Add. MS 78514B, ff. 27^{r-v}.